



Compassionate Authority as Pedagogical Praxis: A Reflective Study of Matthew 9:36 in the Context of SMP Negeri 1 Sirombu

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates compassionate authority as pedagogical praxis through a quantitative analysis grounded in Gospel of Matthew 9:36 and implemented within the educational context of SMP Negeri 1 Sirombu. The research examines how teachers' integration of empathy, fair discipline, instructional clarity, and moral modeling influences student engagement among Christian junior high school students. Using a correlational survey design, data were collected from 192 Christian students selected through proportionate stratified random sampling from a population of 369 Christian students. The instrument measured compassionate authority as the independent variable and student engagement, behavioral, emotional, and cognitive, as the dependent variable. Reliability testing indicated high internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.91$ for compassionate authority; $\alpha = 0.88$ for student engagement). Pearson correlation analysis revealed a strong positive relationship between compassionate authority and student engagement ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.001$). Regression analysis further demonstrated that compassionate authority significantly predicts student engagement ($R^2 = 0.46$), indicating that 46% of the variance in engagement can be explained by teachers' compassionate leadership practices. The findings suggest that authority rooted in relational compassion enhances structured classroom leadership rather than diminishing it. Students demonstrate higher motivation, participation, and cognitive investment when authority is exercised with empathy and fairness. This study contributes to the integration of biblical theology and educational research by providing empirical evidence that the shepherding model of Matthew 9:36 offers a measurable and effective framework for contemporary pedagogical practice.

Keywords: *Compassionate Authority, Christian Religious Education, Pedagogical Praxis*

INTRODUCTION

The question of authority in education remains one of the most debated themes in contemporary pedagogy. In modern classrooms, authority is often interpreted either as institutional control or as instructional expertise. However, within Christian educational thought, authority is inseparable from compassion. The Gospel narrative in Gospel of

Matthew presents a distinctive portrait of Jesus' leadership that integrates both dimensions. In Gospel of Matthew 9:36, Jesus is described as being moved with compassion for the crowds because they were "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." This verse situates authority not as coercive dominance but as shepherding care grounded in empathy. Such a paradigm offers fertile ground for pedagogical reflection, particularly in contexts where teachers exercise formal authority within structured institutional settings. The Greek verb *esplagchnisthē* (ἐσπλαγχνίσθη) in Matthew 9:36 conveys a deep visceral compassion, indicating not superficial sympathy but profound affective engagement (France, 2007). At the same time, the shepherd imagery evokes leadership, guidance, and protective oversight, echoing Old Testament motifs of covenantal care (Brueggemann, 1997). The narrative therefore presents a theology of authority shaped by mercy. As noted by Nolland (2005), Matthew's Gospel consistently portrays Jesus' authority as restorative rather than oppressive. This theological tension between authority and compassion becomes pedagogically significant when applied to classroom leadership, especially in adolescent education where issues of discipline, motivation, and relational trust are prominent. Educational theory likewise affirms that effective teaching requires both relational sensitivity and instructional leadership. Shulman (1987) emphasizes pedagogical content knowledge as the integration of subject mastery and student-centered delivery. Similarly, Noddings (2013) argues that an ethic of care is foundational to meaningful learning relationships. When authority is exercised without empathy, classroom climates tend toward alienation; conversely, compassion without structure risks instructional incoherence. The integration of both dimensions forms what may be termed "compassionate authority," a construct that resonates strongly with Matthew 9:36. This study situates the theological reflection of Matthew 9:36 within the educational context of SMP Negeri 1 Sirombu, a public junior high school in West Nias. The school includes approximately 369 Christian students and 32 Christian teachers, including Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers. As a pluralistic public institution with a significant Christian population, the school provides a meaningful setting for examining how biblical paradigms of leadership inform pedagogical praxis. Adolescence represents a developmental stage characterized by identity formation, emotional volatility, and sensitivity to authority structures. Consequently, the manner in which teachers embody authority significantly shapes students' academic engagement and socio-emotional development. Teacher competence is frequently framed in terms of pedagogical, professional, social, and personal domains (Mulyasa, 2013). However, empirical examination of how biblical theological concepts influence measurable classroom outcomes remains limited. While theological reflection often remains conceptual, quantitative research enables systematic analysis of patterns, correlations, and measurable impacts. By operationalizing "compassionate authority" into measurable constructs, such as perceived teacher empathy, clarity of classroom rules, fairness in discipline, and student engagement, this study seeks to bridge theological reflection and empirical educational research. Matthew 9:36 provides not merely a devotional insight but a conceptual framework for pedagogical praxis. Compassion here precedes instruction; Jesus' teaching and healing ministry flows from his perception of human vulnerability. In educational psychology, teacher empathy has been linked to improved student motivation and classroom climate (Wentzel, 2012). When authority is relationally grounded, it enhances trust, which in turn facilitates

cognitive and moral development. Therefore, investigating compassionate authority quantitatively allows for empirical validation of a biblically grounded pedagogical model. The present study aims to examine the relationship between teachers' compassionate authority and student engagement at SMP Negeri 1 Sirombu. Specifically, it seeks to measure students' perceptions of teacher compassion and authority, analyze the correlation between compassionate authority and classroom engagement, and evaluate the predictive strength of compassionate authority on students' learning motivation. By adopting a quantitative research design, this study provides statistical clarity to a concept often treated purely theologically. In doing so, the research contributes to interdisciplinary dialogue between biblical studies and educational science. It demonstrates that the shepherd-like compassion of Matthew 9:36 is not merely an ancient metaphor but a viable pedagogical construct with measurable relevance in contemporary schooling.

METHODS

A quantitative research design using a correlational approach was used to examine the relationship between compassionate authority and student engagement at SMP Negeri 1 Sirombu, West Nias. A quantitative design was selected to enable statistical measurement of variables derived from the theological construct of Matthew 9:36 and to determine the strength and significance of relationships among them. The study utilized a cross-sectional survey method, collecting data at a single point in time to capture students' perceptions of teacher behavior and their own learning engagement. The research was conducted at SMP Negeri 1 Sirombu, West Nias, a public junior high school with approximately 369 Christian students and 32 Christian teachers, including Christian Religious Education (CRE) teachers. The target population for this study consisted of all Christian students enrolled in the school. The focus on Christian students was intended to ensure theological familiarity with the biblical framework underlying the concept of compassionate authority. A probability sampling method was employed using proportionate stratified random sampling. Students were stratified according to grade level (Grade VII, VIII, and IX) to ensure proportional representation. Using Slovin's formula with a 5% margin of error, the minimum required sample size was calculated. From the total population of 369 Christian students, a sample of approximately 192 students was obtained. This sampling strategy enhanced representativeness and reduced sampling bias. The study included two primary variables: Independent Variable (X): Compassionate Authority (Compassionate authority was operationalized as a composite construct consisting of four measurable dimensions: teacher empathy, perceived care and emotional understanding, fair and consistent discipline, instructional clarity, moral modeling (integrity and patience in classroom leadership) and Dependent Variable (Y): Student Engagement (Student engagement was measured across three dimensions: behavioral engagement (participation and attentiveness, emotional engagement, sense of belonging and motivation, cognitive engagement, effort in understanding and critical thinking). Each dimension was measured using Likert-scale questionnaire items ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed based on educational leadership theory and the theological reflection of Matthew 9:36. Instrument items were adapted from established constructs of teacher care, classroom authority, and student engagement in educational research literature. The questionnaire consisted of: 20 items measuring compassionate authority, and 18 items measuring student engagement. Before full administration, the instrument underwent content validation by two experts in Christian education and educational measurement. A pilot test was conducted with 30 students outside the sample population to test reliability and clarity of items. Construct validity was examined using exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to confirm dimensional alignment of the items. Reliability testing was conducted using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. A reliability coefficient of $\alpha \geq 0.70$ was considered acceptable for internal consistency. Items failing to meet validity thresholds (factor loading < 0.40) were removed prior to final analysis. Data collection was conducted during regular school hours with approval from school authorities. Students were informed about the purpose of the research, confidentiality measures, and voluntary participation. Questionnaires were distributed and completed in supervised classroom settings to ensure uniform administration conditions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The quantitative analysis involved 192 Christian students selected proportionally from Grades VII, VIII, and IX at SMP Negeri 1 Sirombu. Data screening confirmed that all returned questionnaires were complete and suitable for statistical analysis. Reliability testing indicated strong internal consistency. The Compassionate Authority scale yielded a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of 0.91, while the Student Engagement scale produced a coefficient of 0.88. Both values exceed the acceptable threshold of 0.70, indicating high reliability. Descriptive analysis revealed that the overall mean score for Compassionate Authority (X) was 4.12 ($SD = 0.46$) on a five-point Likert scale, indicating a high perception of compassionate authority among teachers. Among its dimensions, Teacher Empathy recorded the highest mean ($M = 4.21$), followed by Instructional Clarity ($M = 4.15$), Fair and Consistent Discipline ($M = 4.05$), and Moral Modeling ($M = 4.07$). These findings suggest that students perceive their teachers as relationally attentive and structurally consistent. For Student Engagement (Y), the overall mean score was 4.03 ($SD = 0.49$), also categorized as high. Behavioral Engagement ($M = 4.08$) slightly exceeded Emotional Engagement ($M = 4.01$) and Cognitive Engagement ($M = 3.99$). The relatively balanced distribution across engagement dimensions indicates that compassionate authority may influence multiple aspects of student participation rather than only surface-level compliance. The high mean scores are contextually significant. With 369 Christian students and 32 Christian teachers, including CRE educators, the school environment provides theological familiarity that may reinforce relational and moral expectations in classroom leadership. However, the statistical findings must be interpreted not merely as indicators of religious homogeneity, but as measurable pedagogical dynamics shaped by leadership style.

Pearson product-moment correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between Compassionate Authority (X) and Student Engagement (Y). The analysis

produced a correlation coefficient of $r = 0.68$ ($p < 0.001$). According to Cohen's (1988) interpretation criteria, this represents a strong positive correlation. The result indicates that higher levels of perceived compassionate authority are significantly associated with higher levels of student engagement. Further dimensional analysis revealed the following correlations: Teacher Empathy and Emotional Engagement: $r = 0.72$, Fair Discipline and Behavioral Engagement: $r = 0.63$, Instructional Clarity and Cognitive Engagement: $r = 0.66$, and Moral Modeling and Overall Engagement: $r = 0.61$. All correlations were statistically significant at $p < 0.001$. These findings demonstrate that each dimension of compassionate authority relates meaningfully to specific components of engagement. Empathy strongly influences students' emotional attachment to learning, while instructional clarity correlates closely with cognitive investment. These results align with contemporary educational psychology research suggesting that teacher-student relational quality predicts academic motivation (Wentzel, 2012). However, this study extends that literature by situating relational authority within a biblical-theological framework derived from Gospel of Matthew 9:36. In that passage, compassion precedes instruction; the shepherd metaphor conveys guidance structured by care. The statistical evidence indicates that when teachers embody this integrated model, measurable engagement outcomes follow.

Simple linear regression analysis was conducted to determine whether Compassionate Authority significantly predicts Student Engagement. The regression model was statistically significant ($F(1,190) = 168.42$, $p < 0.001$). The coefficient of determination (R^2) was 0.46, indicating that 46% of the variance in student engagement can be explained by compassionate authority. This level of explanatory power is substantial within educational research, where multifactorial influences often dilute single-variable effects. The standardized regression coefficient ($\beta = 0.68$, $p < 0.001$) confirms that compassionate authority is a strong predictor of engagement. The regression equation can be expressed as: $\text{Student Engagement} = 1.27 + 0.67 (\text{Compassionate Authority})$. This equation indicates that for every one-unit increase in compassionate authority, student engagement increases by 0.67 units. The positive slope reinforces the theoretical claim that authority rooted in compassion produces constructive motivational outcomes.

The empirical findings offer measurable validation of the shepherding model embedded in Matthew 9:36. Compassion (*esplagchnisthē*) in the Gospel narrative describes not passive sentiment but active concern resulting in teaching and healing. In classroom praxis, compassionate authority operates similarly: teachers first perceive student vulnerability, then structure instruction responsively. The strong correlation between Teacher Empathy and Emotional Engagement ($r = 0.72$) suggests that adolescents are particularly responsive to relational authenticity. Junior high students, navigating identity formation and social sensitivity, interpret authority through affective cues. When authority is detached from empathy, resistance emerges; when empathy is combined with clear expectations, trust strengthens. The significant association between Instructional Clarity and Cognitive Engagement ($r = 0.66$) indicates that compassion does not undermine academic rigor. Rather, structured clarity enhances intellectual investment. Compassionate authority therefore differs from permissiveness. It integrates warmth with boundaries. In biblical imagery, the shepherd both protects and directs;

similarly, teachers provide emotional security while guiding academic growth. The R^2 value of 0.46 suggests that compassionate authority explains nearly half of engagement variance, yet 54% remains influenced by other factors such as peer relationships, family background, and individual learning styles. This underscores that compassionate authority is necessary but not sufficient alone for total engagement optimization.

Compassionate authority parallels transformational leadership constructs. Transformational leaders inspire through relational credibility and moral integrity. However, this study's theological framing adds depth: authority is not merely charismatic influence but covenantal responsibility. The shepherd metaphor implies accountability for student welfare. In the context of SMP Negeri 1 Sirombu, the presence of 32 Christian teachers may reinforce shared moral expectations. Yet the quantitative results indicate that engagement levels vary in proportion to perceived teacher behavior, not merely institutional identity. Therefore, compassionate authority must be enacted consistently to produce measurable outcomes. For CRE teachers specifically, the findings highlight that biblical teaching cannot remain abstract. Matthew 9:36 becomes pedagogically potent when embodied in classroom demeanor. Students respond statistically to observable compassion expressed through patience, fairness, and clarity. The data demonstrate that compassionate authority fosters: Increased classroom participation, Reduced behavioral resistance, Enhanced intrinsic motivation, and Stronger emotional attachment to learning. These outcomes collectively support holistic formation-intellectual, emotional, and moral. One potential concern in educational discourse is whether compassion weakens disciplinary effectiveness. The correlation between Fair Discipline and Behavioral Engagement ($r = 0.63$) counters this assumption. Students respond positively to structured authority when it is perceived as just and consistent. Discipline divorced from empathy generates fear; empathy without structure produces confusion. Compassionate authority resolves this dichotomy. The regression findings confirm that structured compassion enhances rather than diminishes engagement. Authority here functions not as control but as relational stewardship. Causality cannot be definitively established beyond predictive association. Longitudinal research could examine how sustained compassionate authority influences academic achievement over time. The sample focused exclusively on Christian students to maintain theological alignment with Matthew 9:36. Future studies might include broader student populations to test generalizability beyond confessional familiarity. The results provide empirical evidence that compassionate authority, conceptually grounded in Gospel of Matthew 9:36, functions as a measurable pedagogical variable within a contemporary junior high school. The strong positive correlation ($r = 0.68$) and significant regression model ($R^2 = 0.46$) demonstrate that when authority is exercised through relational empathy, instructional clarity, and moral consistency, student engagement increases significantly. The discussion confirms that biblical compassion is not antithetical to structured leadership. Rather, it forms the ethical foundation of effective authority. In SMP Negeri 1 Sirombu, compassionate authority operates as pedagogical praxis—an enacted integration of care and governance that shapes measurable educational outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that compassionate authority, grounded in theological reflection on Gospel of Matthew 9:36, functions as a measurable and significant predictor of student engagement within the context of SMP Negeri 1 Sirombu. Through a quantitative correlational design involving 192 Christian students, the findings reveal a strong positive relationship ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.001$) between teachers' compassionate authority and students' behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. The regression analysis further indicates that compassionate authority accounts for 46% of the variance in student engagement, underscoring its substantial explanatory power within classroom dynamics. The results confirm that authority, when exercised through empathy, fairness, instructional clarity, and moral modeling, enhances rather than diminishes student motivation. Compassion does not weaken discipline; instead, it legitimizes authority by grounding it in relational trust. Students respond positively to structured leadership when it is perceived as just, patient, and attentive to their developmental needs. In adolescent educational settings, where identity formation and sensitivity to authority are particularly pronounced, compassionate authority emerges as a pedagogical necessity rather than an optional virtue. The shepherd imagery in Matthew 9:36 provides a coherent framework for understanding authority as relational stewardship. Jesus' compassion precedes and informs His teaching ministry, offering a model in which leadership is exercised for the restoration and guidance of those under care. Empirically, this study affirms that such a model is not merely devotional or symbolic; it is pedagogically effective and statistically demonstrable within contemporary schooling. The findings suggest that teacher development programs, particularly within Christian educational contexts, should integrate relational competence with classroom management training. Authority must be framed not only as procedural control but as ethical responsibility shaped by compassion. For Christian Religious Education teachers, this integration strengthens the coherence between biblical teaching and instructional practice. While the cross-sectional design limits causal inference, the statistical strength of the findings invites further longitudinal and comparative research. Future studies may explore how compassionate authority influences academic achievement over time or how the construct operates in more religiously diverse settings. Compassionate authority emerges as a viable pedagogical praxis: a leadership model that unites empathy and structure, theology and empirical evidence, conviction and care. Within SMP Negeri 1 Sirombu, it proves not only spiritually resonant but educationally effective, affirming that authority rooted in compassion fosters meaningful and measurable student engagement.

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